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Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema

Eds. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer and Richard Leppert. Pp. viii + 324 (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2007. £15.95. ISBN 0-520-25070-3

The academic study of film music is entering an interesting phase: some of the premises on which the last twenty or so years of scholarship have been grounded are being challenged from within the field. This collection brings together sixteen essays by renowned writers on film music and musicologists noted for their work on the social and cultural context of musical production and reception, to explore how “film conceptualizes music” (3). The majority of the contributions build on classic work in film musicology and focus on Western films, though they usefully continue to broaden the repertoire and to raise questions rather than offering answers. A handful of essays – notably those offered by film musicologists – actively confront the assumptions of such frameworks (or histories), in some cases suggesting alternatives. Theory plays a leading role in a number of the essays and is usefully interwoven with analysis and/or cultural critique in the main. The collection is nominally split into three sections – Musical Meaning, Musical Agency, and Musical Identity – though a substantial overlap exists between these categories. There is not space to discuss all of the essays this strong collection in detail, alas.

I begin with Robynn Stilwell’s essay, “The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic,” which might just lead to a potentially radical change in how we conceptualise film music. Emphasising the ossification that taxonomic categorisation of music as diegetic or nondiegetic brings, and which has become endemic in much film music scholarship, Stilwell focuses on films’ frequent traversals of the diegetic/nondiegetic border. Her ideas

build on the field's growing concern with the character these border crossings, as explored elsewhere by Heather Laing (2000), Jim Buhler (2001) and Rick Altman (1985), for example, though often only briefly. Stilwell envisages this crossing-over/trajectory-through as a process or 'vector', rather than a switch. This gap "changes the state, not only of the filmic moment, but also the of the observer's relationship to it" (200). By contemplating "some of the axes along which we can negotiate that gap" (187), she argues that we may begin to map the geography of this soundscape. The axes offered are those that run between diegetic and nondiegetic, foreground and background, subjectivity and objectivity, and empathy and anempathy. To complicate matters, however, the various axes don't necessarily correlate in a straightforward way. Diegetic music sometimes operates more subjectively and some nondiegetic music functions more objectively, for example. Following moments of destabilization, a combination of such factors might guide us toward a particular interpretation as we try to pin down one view over another, only to wrong foot us, which might lead us to attempt to change our view retroactively. The position of the audience member is "constantly shifting, [...] we are sliding along these various axes at different speeds and in different directions, and in our disorientation we are more susceptible to the effects along the way" (192).

This framework of axes has the potential to enable far more specific conceptualisation of the border crossings that characterise so much film music, but which have thus far been little discussed, such as the intriguing category that Claudia Gorbman labelled "metadiegetic" in *Unheard Melodies* (1987). Stilwell's writing is clear and accessible, and is supported with examples from a wide range of films. The essay is persuasive in a number of ways: the three-dimensionality of the framework, the focus on continua over categories, and on process over classification. In another essay, Richard Dyer considers some of the same issues to explore

the character of “ironic attachment” that Nino Rota’s film scores afford. These two essays complement each other in quite interesting ways.

Berthold Hoeckner investigates a different aspect of border crossing: here between *watching* people imagine, and *what* they imagine. He compares the ecstatic, rhapsodic ‘transport’ that music can allow, with its capacity as a carrier of signification or acting as stimulation, i.e. ‘transportation’. Although I would not have thought there was much left to say about the music in *Casablanca*, Hoekner’s terms do provide an insightful means of comparing our views of Ilsa and Rick when Sam plays ‘As Time Goes By’; for Ilsa, we see the transport (we watch her face as she remembers), for Rick, the transportation (we are transported back *with* Rick, and watch the unfolding of their past via the action onscreen).

In what might be construed as a rebuttal to her earlier study of classical cinema, *Unheard Melodies*, Claudia Gorbman turns her attention to the “heard melodies” of a number of auteur directors that she tantalisingly labels “Mélomanes” (sort of, “crazy about music”). She discusses the familiar music-propelled approach of Wenders, Tarantino and Kubrick in brief, highlighting the work of Jean-Luc Godard and Tsai Ming-Liang in more detail. In fact, rather than a reversal of her earlier work, Gorbman here expands and explores some of the ideas mentioned in the book’s “Afterword.” Nick Cook also explores a music-led film, but of a different kind: a fictionalised reconstruction of the first play-through of Beethoven’s Third Symphony in June 1804, commissioned and screened by the BBC; *Eroica* (2003). This unusual and much praised television film is largely structured by the performance of the work, and its depiction of a form of socialized listening. Its dramatized auditors ‘mediate identification with the music’ (39), and if the (self-selecting) respondents to an interactive website dedicated to the film are to be believed, the approach won over new listeners to Beethoven’s music.

Beethoven is notably present onscreen in *Eroica*. By contrast, Krin Gabbard highlights that African-Americans are largely absent from films that feature musical performances by Miles Davis. Gabbard presents compelling analyses that trace practices that range from the control Davis exerted over the music he composed/improvised for Malle's *Elevator to the Scaffold* (1957) to the selection of his music as heard on albums he released decades previously, as with Minghella's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999). He interprets the lack of black characters in such sequences as potentially ideological, though possibly also indicative of the transcendence of Davis' music beyond (historical/racial) categories in the ears of the audience, for good or bad.

Richard Leppert provides a detailed and enriching account of Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*. This film tells the tale of a man who carried a boat aloft a hill in the early years of the twentieth century in order to access an untapped source of Peru's rubber trees in service of opera rather than financial gain *per se*; to bring opera to Iquitos by building an opera house there. For Leppert, the film is constructed as operatic, and the operatic hyperbole of its narrative and artifice of its "numbers" are presented in dialectical tension with the director's documentary-like approach to the image. Opera, and its inherent irrationality, enables the critique of film as a visual (rationalising, modernist) medium.

In an essay concerned with male characters playing the piano onscreen, Gary C. Thomas argues that moments of liminality in these performances offer the opportunity for imagining *being otherwise*; heterotopia. A male pianist also takes centre stage in contrasting readings of Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*. Both Lawrence Kramer and Michel Chion discuss the scene that takes place in the ruined building, when we hear Szpilman play Chopin's G minor Ballade for the German soldier/officer. The performance of the Ballade is immensely powerful in this context and, certainly when I experienced it, potentially also terrifying. As

Chion puts it, “Perhaps because it suggests that after the horror of the Holocaust everything can go on as before, as if the music remained absolutely intact” (91). For Kramer, the critical point is that the music is abridged, and that the elision changes the character of the music in a crucial way. Although the music offers pleasure to the listener, it does so in such a way that in also “brings with it a question of responsibility” (79). For Kramer the music is ambivalent, and thus the scene is able to function in both ways. Implicit here is the view that were the work heard in full, and thus its resolution achieved with more satisfaction in harmonic terms, then the ambivalence might tip toward catharsis and sentimentality. Kramer’s point is a good one, but I cannot help wanting to know who made the decision to edit the Ballade, and for what purpose. Perhaps the scene was simply judged to be too long. My question is beside the point in some senses and certainly does not undermine Kramer’s interpretation, but the answer might reveal a more “real-world” recognition of the place of music in film that also has interesting things to say.

Chion notes that classical music often “narrates its own genesis,” and Polanski’s choice of the Chopin Ballade seems to follow this route, beginning falteringly, but ultimately generating the work in its fullness. The Ballade is “marked by many interruptions and silences,” and in this way suggests difficulty in speaking (93). Cinema allows Polanski to highlight a forgotten aspect of Romantic music in selecting this work: its “song without words” quality. Making a comparison with Ada’s piano playing in Campion’s *The Piano*, Chion explains that as listeners we must “occupy two places at once” (94): that is, we know, for example, that what Szpilman plays is Chopin, and we may indeed know the Ballade that has been selected, but we must forget this and hear the music as though it were new to us. Specifically, it is cinema that allows us to do so: it “gives us the ability to rediscover what we call music, what we have heard thousands of times, in conditions that approximate the first

time by virtue of creating its own new context.” (95) This, he argues, exemplifies the superimposition of diegetic reality and cinematic reality that describes our experience of music in cinema, and enables us to rediscover “music.”

Daniel Goldmark and Rick Altman’s contributions rediscover or, rather, recover film music history. Goldmark investigates the forerunners of ‘cartoon music’, emphasising the importance of Fleisher’s ‘bouncing ball’ song animations in the acceptance of synchronized sound more generally. Altman presents a much needed history of thematic scoring during the silent era which demonstrates its distinction as a practice and difference from notions of the leitmotif. From the mid-1910s to the mid-1920s film scores using the thematic approach involved repetition of a single theme from a piece of published music, and might comprise c. 20-25% of the total score. Despite criticism, the thematic approach continued well into the 1920s because it “served all participants well” (217). For example, it was easier than coming up with new selections for every cue. It helped to sell the music. It was easier and more practical for the musicians. Importantly, it also assisted with the problem of musical “wear out”: previously, moving picture pianists and orchestras used music that formed part of the cultural memory, but as certain works began to be over-used, the popular music industry came to the rescue. Thematic scoring helped to solve the problem created by the need to bring new works into the repertory by assisting audience acceptance: new music was used, but within the framework of a film using the thematic approach. This offered the audience recognition and recovery of these new pieces, and thus enabled the creation of an alternative “public sphere” (220).

The genesis of Peter Franklin’s essay was also set in motion by an experience that suggest the existence of a “public sphere” of film scores even today; he takes his cue from watching (and listening to) a child on a train deeply engaged in re-creating or re-imagining

Star Wars via his own musical narrative. Franklin points to nineteenth and twentieth century writers (and some composers) who saw a similar activity in nineteenth century concert-goers (fictional or otherwise), to explore the complementarity of nineteenth-century symphonic music and twentieth-century film. In a vein similar to Franklin, Susan McClary highlights similarities between nineteenth-century symphonic music and narrative fiction: both “aspire to deliver the illusion of seamless continuity” and “portray the trajectory of a subject overcoming obstacles and securing ultimate goals as though by inevitable means of cause and effect” (50). McClary discusses three recent films — all of which are set in the past — in which minimalist musical materials are used to great effect: *The Hours* (scored by Philip Glass), *The Piano* (Nyman), and *Angels and Insects* (Balanesu). Where elements of nineteenth-century symphonic music have been and are used in film scores to “intensify all manner of aspirations” (50), she asks what signification minimalism might hold in this context, other than refusal? What it “resists” or “refuses” here is Romantic harmonic resolution. In the case of these films McClary argues that the choice of minimalism (and reference to, but avoidance of, harmonic resolution) offers commentaries upon the films’ themes: time passing in *The Hours*; claustrophobia, obsessive and all-pervasive desire (incest) in *Angels and Insects*; imprisonment in *The Piano*. Furthermore, that the disjunction between the films’ period settings and the use of minimalist techniques of composition invites us “to rethink deeply ingrained notions of the nineteenth century, conditioned responses to sound in cinema, and even our conceptions of selfhood” (62). While I am not entirely convinced that audiences hear minimalist scores as outside of the conventions of film music today, McClary’s analyses are incisive and perceptive.

Few studies of minimalist film scores have been published thus far, so it is a bonus to find an essay that focuses on another Glass score in the same collection: Mitchell Morris

offers a detailed exploration of Reggio's enigmatic film *Koyaanisqatsi*. Reggio's aim had been to reveal the extent to which technology is embedded in our everyday lives, the extent to which "we *live* technology" (Reggio, cited 122). Glass' score is one of the means by which the film aspires to mythicisation: the slow patterns of transformation in Philip Glass' music here relating to the emphasis on non-identical or inexact repetition in the film's images and structures.

As a composer and sound designer, Phil Brophy adds a practitioner's voice. Here he takes a position similar to that playfully proposed elsewhere by Rick Altman (1980), and encourages film music/sound scholars to focus on sound and music as primary, rather than supportive and confirming of the image; sound has the potential for "flight," while the view of the screen lies beyond our control. Brophy's choice of films goes beyond the collection's main focus on Western films: Kanevski's *An Independent Life* (1992) and Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1963). They allow him to show the range of possibilities that sound *could* enjoy were it offered greater freedom than convention allows in mainstream cinema. But, there are of course good reasons why those involved in mainstream cinema prefer to contain or confine the sonic, rather than giving it free expression, not least of which is efficiency in the communication of information. Nonetheless, Brophy's essay is provocative in urging scholars to push their critical skills beyond the recognition of conventions. This urgency to push beyond boundaries, to question, is a stated aim of *Beyond the Soundtrack*. It is fair to say that some of the essays accomplish this better than others; a few did little that really went "beyond" enriching our awareness of repertoire, though of course that is useful too. But this is a small criticism of a strong and rich collection that will benefit the field in a variety of ways.

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